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As Afghanistan's opium crop soared last year, heroin from that region is increasingly showing up in Chicago and likely reaching suburban users lured by its purity, authorities said Monday.

"The overwhelming misconception here is that heroin abuse is only a problem of Chicago," U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) said after meeting with law enforcement officials. "Whether the heroin is from Colombia or Afghanistan, it's here and we see it because of the rising number of emergency-room visits in the collar counties."

Kirk pressed for more education about suburban heroin abuse and for increased efforts to eradicate poppy production in Afghanistan. He also encouraged police chiefs to apply for federal grants aimed at curbing suburban drug gangs.

The number of suburban heroin users began to increase in the 1990s when a highly pure, powdery form of the narcotic became available from South America, officials said. The purer heroin can be snorted and smoked, instead of injected, making it more appealing to suburban youth.

Chicago still outpaces the suburbs in the number of heroin users, but teens treated for heroin more than doubled in suburban Cook County between 1995 and 2002, according to a Roosevelt University study published last year. The number more than quadrupled in the collar counties.

The study also found that the Chicago area leads the nation for the most heroin-related emergency-room visits, with suburban teenagers increasingly among the users. In 2002, the Chicago area recorded 12,982 heroin-related ER visits, the most in the country for the fifth consecutive year and a 176 percent increase since 1995, according to federal data.

Suburban use has increased as heroin has become purer in quality, said Master Sgt. Terry Lemming, drug enforcement coordinator with the Illinois State Police. The heroin from

Southwest Asia, including Afghanistan, is among the purest, he said.

It's unclear how much heroin from Afghanistan is ending up in Chicago, but more of the heroin seized in the last year originated in Southwest Asia, said Richard Sanders, the Drug Enforcement Administration's special agent in charge in Chicago.

Laboratory tests can detect where the heroin was produced.

Opium cultivation in Afghanistan shot up by 64 percent in 2004 and was valued at \$2.8 billion, about 60 percent of the country's gross domestic product, according to the United Nations' 2004 Afghanistan Opium Survey.

Under the Taliban-controlled government, opium production had dropped because poppy harvesting was banned for everyone except Taliban members, according to Kirk.

Most Afghan heroin is exported to Europe and surrounding areas, while Colombia and Mexico remain the biggest providers in the United States, Sanders said.

Chicago is unique in that heroin flows to the city from all four sources: South America, Mexico, Southeast Asia and Southwest Asia, he said.

"The Afghan crop is so huge that it is affecting markets everywhere," said Kirk, who has been pushing for efforts to slow poppy production in Afghanistan.

He has asked the State Department to purchase 18 helicopters to help Afghan police eradicate the poppy crops. The helicopters would transport people to the fields to kill the plants.

Suburban heroin use is most prevalent in the west and northwest suburbs, along with northwest

Indiana, Sanders said. He said law enforcement officials have mostly focused on the problem in Chicago but now need to redirect resources to the suburbs.

Lemming, of the state police, agreed that while most suburban heroin users drive to Chicago to get heroin, some dealers have moved to the suburbs as Chicago police bust drug rings.

"We are finding a lot of suburban kids drive to markets in the city, which are declining because of the fine work of the Chicago Police Department," Lemming said. "They are driving drug dealers to the suburbs."